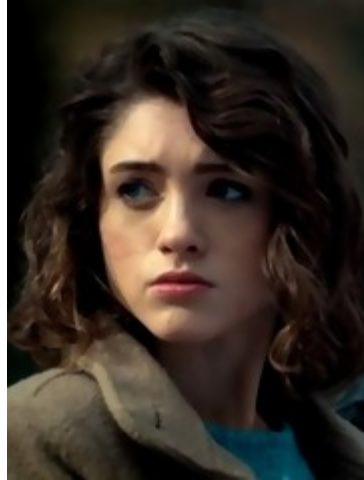




Echo by **theowlandtheunicorn**

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Summary: She's burned down the lab and laid Barb to rest, so why isn't it getting any easier? Takes place before the Snow Ball. Nancy-centric.

1. Chapter 1

"Nancy?"

She brings her hand up in a little wave.

"Hey."

Hopper shuts the door of his office.

"What are you – did something happen?" His hand hovers above his gun. "Is your brother –"

"No, no, everyone's fine," she says, and smiles in reassurance. "It's nothing like that."

His fingers clench and unclench, then relax. He exhales quietly.

He's so prepared, Nancy thinks. The thought brings her a tiny spark of comfort, more than she can remember feeling in a long time. *He's still so prepared for anything.*

Glancing unsurely at the huge bag next to her chair, Hopper goes to sit at his desk.

"What's up, then?" he asks.

Before answering, Nancy casts another look around.

When Flo showed her in, her first impression of Hopper's office was that it's not what she expected. She still doesn't know what exactly that was, but it definitely wasn't the sunlight peeking through the old-fashioned pastel curtains, or a clunky black phone and a jar full of pencils that she herself has on her desk, or the faint smell of coffee, disinfectant and the unemptied ashtray.

It just feels so... homey.

Homey isn't something a police chief's office should feel like.

"How... safe are we?" she asks.

Hopper frowns. "What do you mean? We're at a police station."

"I mean..." She leans forward. "Can we *talk*."

They share a second's worth of looks, then Hopper gets up, walks to the door and opens it. He looks down both sides of the hallway before closing it again, and turns back towards her.

"Talk."

Nancy bites her lip. "You're sure?"

"Jesus, kid, give me *some* credit," he grumbles as he walks back to his chair.

Nancy keeps looking at him.

Hopper brings a hand to his forehead and sighs.

"No one goes in here without my knowledge," he says. "We're surrounded by the people I'd trust with my life, and I still check the office every morning when I get here. That satisfy your standards?"

She smiles apologetically.

"If I say it's safe, it's safe," he reiterates. "Now talk."

"Okay."

She opens her mouth, then closes it. For several moments, she can't find the words.

This is so stupid, she thinks. She has no idea why she suddenly feels so nervous. It's a nice thing she's doing, right? He'll be glad.

"Uh... Lately, I've been thinking about this whole situation... with El," she says, dropping her voice. Hopper leans forward at the mention of the name. He seems bigger, somehow, as he does; interested, concerned, proud, protective.

We're so lucky he's on our side.

"It's kind of hard not to," she continues, "since Mike won't shut up

about it."

Hopper's eyes darken.

"I assume he's being careful," he says through gritted teeth, "because all I'm hearing is that keeping it a secret was the right thing to do."

"Oh, yeah, he is," she says, "don't worry about that. So anyway... I've been thinking about how we could make this situation a bit more tolerable for her until she's free to go outside."

Hoper shakes his head regretfully.

"Not many ways, I'm afraid."

"Yes," Nancy says. "I realize that. But..." She shifts in her chair. "Okay, this is gonna sound really silly and stupid, but... I remembered those things she was wearing that night."

He chuckles. "Not my pick, kid."

"I know," she says with a laugh. "But that's the thing. I'm not exactly sure you've had plenty of opportunities to go out and buy some proper clothes for her."

"No, not plenty. Mostly I just gave her my old stuff."

"Exactly. But she's thirteen. She probably wants to wear some stuff she actually likes, not..."

Without thinking, Nancy casts an unsure glance at Hopper's uniform. He gives her an amused look.

"Oversized flannel shirts and overalls? That's what you're thinking?"

Nancy laughs.

"In any case..." She picks up the huge bag and heaves it on his desk next to the typewriter. Several papers fly to the floor.

Hopper's eyes narrow.

"Wait a minute," he says. "Am I hearing this right? You bought her

clothes?"

"Well... not exactly," Nancy says, grimacing. "This is just some of my stuff. But it's things I've never really worn so they're all as good as new. I wasn't really sure about the size, I hope they fit... And there aren't many, just some shirts and dresses, a couple of cardigans and a pair of pants. I know mom wants to save some for Holly so I had to be careful, but we have so much stuff, I really don't think she's going to miss these. If she asks I'll just tell her I gave them to charity."

While she was talking, Hopper's attention was switching between her and the bag, and as she finishes, it settles fully on her. She can't decipher that look.

"You're not... offended, are you?" she asks timidly.

Something like a laugh bursts forth from him.

"Offended?" he asks. "Why would I be offended?"

"Because it's like... hand-me-downs."

Okay, there's no mistake, this is definitely a laugh. She doesn't think she's ever seen him laugh before. It disperses a bit of the unease that's been sitting on her chest since she arrived.

"Are you kidding me?" he says. "She's been wearing hand-me-downs from *me* for a year, and before that..." he trails off, anger flickering for a second in his eyes, then disappearing, smothered, behind a smile. "This is going to be a *marked* improvement."

Nancy chuckles.

"This is great, kid, she's gonna love it. Thanks."

She smiles another apology.

"I did think about buying her some stuff," she says. Hopper gets up and rummages through the bag, looking more delighted than she ever thought he had the ability to look. "Really, I'm not just saying that. But..." She bites her lip. "The thing is... Well... I can't just pretend I'm buying something for myself, you know, because we're not the same

size," she says, and winces. *Lying to the police chief, brilliant idea, Nancy*, she thinks. But Hopper doesn't seem to be listening. "And... I was just worried that someone was going to... see me."

There. One part of the truth, at least.

"What do you mean?" Hopper says absent-mindedly. He takes out the lilac dress and holds it out in front of him. His eyes shine.

"The people... from the lab," she says.

The dress glides from Hopper's fingers back into the bag. He sits down, frowning.

"The people from the lab are in prison," he says. "Thanks to you and Jonathan, and that idiot Bauman."

"I know, I know. But... There's always more of those kinds of people, right?"

Hopper keeps looking at her.

Nancy sighs. She looks at the window behind him, at the sunlight dancing on the other side of the curtains.

"I don't know, I just... I just feel like I'm always being watched," she says.

As she says this, the light seems to fade away into background. The words become more true as she hears her own voice uttering them, more real somehow.

Chills run up her forearms.

She takes a deep breath. "Like... at school, or in a supermarket, or whatever. It always feels like someone's out there just... making sure we don't say something or do something we're not supposed to. And like... if I go and buy a dress a thirteen-year-old girl might wear, or something like that, I... They might get suspicious."

Nancy looks away from the window, looks down at her hands, wrings them.

Damn it, why did I say that? She squeezes her eyes shut. She wanted to do a nice thing and only made everything worse. And she can't reverse it, the words are there, floating in the air of Hopper's office, and neither of them is likely to forget about them.

On the other hand... it's Hopper. If anyone would know what to do with it, it's Hopper.

She reverts her attention back to him, only to realize that he hasn't moved a muscle, like a statue sitting at the desk observing her, narrowed eyes piercing into hers. Suddenly she feels like a suspect. The silence feels too intense, and Nancy squirms in her chair.

"You feel like someone's watching you?"

"Not just watching *me*," she says defensively. "All of us."

He still gazes at her. Tilts his head a little.

"And you feel like that all the time?"

She nods.

Maybe he feels it too. Maybe he knows something. Maybe there's something we can do –

"Have you tried talking to someone about it?"

Is he serious?

Nancy scoffs. "Who do I talk to?"

For a moment, Hopper looks as if he's regretting the question, then he seems to think about it.

"How about Joyce?"

"Joyce?" she repeats. Why would she want to talk to Jonathan's mom?

I'm talking to you.

"I'm just thinking," he says, "if anyone knows anxiety, it's her."

Nancy blinks.

"I'm not anxious," she says, her brows furrowing. How can he be totally missing the point? "I'm *fine*. I just don't want to give those people a reason to think something's up. I'm being *cautious*. What's so crazy about that?"

"I'm not saying it's crazy," Hopper says in a placating tone of voice. Something about it makes her inexplicably angry. "I'm just saying that maybe you don't have to feel like that all the time."

"It's not like it's a choice," she begins, "it's just how it is –"

"But it shouldn't, kid," he says softly. "It shouldn't be like that. Not for you."

Nancy's eyes fill with tears. She looks down, breathing deeply through her nose.

Of course it shouldn't be like that. *Nothing* about this past year should be like it is –

But what's the damn use of saying so?

The space between them feels like miles.

I should have known.

"I thought... you, of all people, would understand," she murmurs.

"I *do* understand!" Hopper says fervently, leaning forward and slamming a hand on the desk. For a moment he seems angry with himself; glancing at the door, he lowers his voice. "Believe me, I understand the *hell* out of it. That doesn't mean I approve. This – this is not how it's supposed to be for you. You're what, sixteen, seventeen? You shouldn't be thinking about that stuff. You should be... I don't know, having dumb fun with your girlfriends, going out, going shopping –"

"Because that's all a seventeen-year-old girl is good for." She meets his eyes defiantly. "*Shopping.*"

Barb loved shopping –

She looks down again. Two tears fall into her lap. She can practically feel the force of Hopper's glare upon her.

"That's not what I meant," he growls. "You *know* that's not what I meant."

For several seconds neither of them speak. The distance between them seems to stretch into infinity.

Soon enough, Nancy wipes her eyes. Clears her throat.

"Do you want the clothes or not?" she says curtly.

"What? Of course I do."

Nodding, she gets up to leave.

"Hey, don't think this is about the clothes," Hopper says. "I couldn't care less the stuff's not new, I'm so grateful that you'd even think to do this for her. I just don't want you to have that kind of life, I..." He shakes his head and sighs. "*Your* life shouldn't be like that."

Nancy stops. Almost laughs.

"Yeah, well." She turns around and meets his eyes. "It is."

This was such a mistake.

"Kid, wait, don't go."

The door slams behind her.

"Nancy!"

A/N: This was meant to be an attempt to branch out a bit from Steve and Dustin into Nancy and Hopper, but then I realized I want Steve in the story too, and then Jonathan couldn't not be in it, and also Mike because El's in it, so it's probably going to be a POV mess. A Nancy-centric, hopefully-in-character, I-only-sort-of-know-where-I'm-

going-here POV mess.

Thank you for reading! Reviews are super welcome!

2. Chapter 2

A/N: First time writing Mike, I hope he's Mike enough!

Nancy marches from the police station to her house, indignation making her face burn.

Anxious? *Her?*

She scoffs.

This is all such bullshit.

And who the hell does he think he is, telling her to talk to someone?

Nancy doesn't want to talk.

She wants to destroy something.

She wants to feel safe.

She wants to not feel guilty anymore.

Talking won't give her a single thing she wants.

She enters her house in a huff, not bothering to say hello (like anyone cares). She takes off her coat and goes to the living room.

As she walks in, suddenly all the anger she's worked up since leaving Hopper's office seems to turn into fatigue. Her feet hurt, and her bones feel so heavy she can't hold herself up anymore. She sits on the sofa, leans her head on a pillow and closes her eyes. She can feel a headache coming on.

After several moments, she can hear Mike running up from the basement. He slows down as he approaches the sofa. Nancy ignores him.

"So?" he asks eagerly. "What did he say?"

She sighs in annoyance.

"He said thanks," she mutters. "What else is he gonna say?"

Mike rolls his eyes.

"I mean, is she going to like it?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, what do you think?" he insists, for the thousandth time that week. Nancy starts massaging her temples.

"I don't know, Mike," she snaps. "You saw the stuff yourself, what do *you* think?"

Surprisingly, he doesn't bite back. Instead, he sits on the end of the couch and sighs.

"But that's just it," he begins quietly. "I don't know." He stares at the bookshelf on the opposite wall, looking troubled. "I have no idea what she likes. I don't even know what her favorite color is or anything. I don't know anything about her," he mumbles.

Nancy stares at her little brother, feeling her annoyance melt away into sadness.

He just misses her, she thinks. *He just misses her so much.*

"You can always ask her," she says gently. "At least now you get to see her occasionally."

Mike sighs again, looking at the floor.

"Yeah, but... I wish it was more than just occasionally."

Nancy leans towards him and puts a hand on his back (lately, she can hardly believe how tall he's become).

"It will be. You just have to give it time."

He huffs.

"I just don't understand," he says. "How can he still keep her locked up in that cabin? She's already spent twelve years trapped in that hellhole and now he's –"

Nancy clamps a hand over his mouth.

"*Shut. Up,*" she whispers.

Everything slows down around her. The room seems quieter than usual.

Mike frowns and wiggles away.

"What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with *you*?" she hisses. "Someone could hear you!"

"I'm not an idiot, Nancy, mom's upstairs and dad's asleep –"

"I don't mean –" She closes her eyes and exhales. She goes to the window and looks outside.

No one's there. At least as far as she can see.

She returns to the sofa. Mike's staring at her like she's crazy.

"I don't mean *them*," she says. "I mean the people from the lab." The last word is barely audible. The air in the room stands still, and Nancy becomes aware of her headache again, half-forgotten during the brief moments of dread. She puts a cold hand over her forehead.

"The... *who*? The people from the lab are in prison – who's going to hear me?"

"I don't know. I don't want to risk it," she whispers.

"But there's no risk," Mike says in confusion.

"How the hell do *you* know?" Nancy snaps, lurching forward. "You're always talking about it like we're all safe but you don't know – you have no idea! None of us does! We have no idea how many of them there are or what they're going to do next –" She barely has any clue

what she's saying, and her head starts pounding, and thinking feels like a struggle through the pain. "Just – just – do us all a favor and shut up about it already!"

Nancy realizes she's breathing heavily. She leans back again, squeezing her eyes shut.

"Typical," Mike mutters.

"*Excuse me?*"

"I said it's typical! Every time I think you're just a little bit nicer you become all mean and horrible again! You're so predictable it's not even funny!"

"Hey, I'm only saying that for *your* sake! And for hers, Mike – for all of us!"

"Yeah right! I can't believe you! I bet you would've kept her hidden for a year too –"

"Of *course* I would!" she exclaims. "It was the right thing to do, it made sense!"

As soon as the words leave her lips, Nancy knows it's the worst possible thing she could have said.

Something seems to break in Mike's eyes. For a moment she thinks he's going to lash out, scream at her with the most hateful things he can think of, but he just gazes at her and there's that stillness again, that eerie silence of the room. Then Mike gets up and walks away, muttering something under his breath.

"*What* did you say?"

"I SAID YOU'RE JUST LIKE HIM!" he yells, and runs up the stairs.

Nancy stares after him, her mouth slightly open.

No insults or swear words? That's something, at least.

Right?

Her vision goes blurry.

He's wrong, though. She's nothing like Hopper.

If she was, maybe she wouldn't be feeling this way.

If she was, at least she'd have one person who understands her.

But Hopper doesn't see people following him every time he goes outside, or carry the weight of his best friend's death with him –

Nancy takes a deep breath and realizes she is shaking. She gets up from the sofa. She doesn't want to be here anymore.

But there's nowhere to go. She's already home.

The sleepy, disgruntled face of her father appears in the room.

"What's with all the yelling?"

"That wasn't me, that was Mike," she snaps.

"I don't care who it was," he drawls, "keep it down. Some of us are trying to get some rest."

She's just about to retort when her mother comes down the stairs, looking worried.

"Nancy? What happened? Your brother is really upset –"

"Ugh, *whatever!*"

"Nancy," her mother tries, but Nancy rushes up the stairs past her. She knows no one will follow.

Entering her room, she shuts the door, sits on the bed and lets the familiar comfort envelop her. Her head feels like it's about to explode.

After a few moments, she realizes she can hear the quiet but unmistakable sounds of Mike's sobs from his room.

Great, this is just great.

Nancy puts her face in her hands as waves of guilt wash over her. It's not fair that she feels so guilty. It's not fair that it's always her fault. *Nothing* is fair.

She hears a sad little wail from the direction of Holly's room. Her sister, the sweetest, quietest child in the world starts crying, and Nancy can practically hear her mother's soothing whispers –

– *Shhh, Holly, it's okay, it's just your brother and sister having another argument. But they're fine, we're all fine. Everything's fine.*

Her eyes fall on her night table, and the picture of her and Barb hugging, happy, young and alive.

Feeling somehow both older and younger than seventeen, Nancy lies down and starts to cry herself.

A/N: MAN, THE ANGST. I had no idea. I swear it wasn't supposed to be this angsty. I blame the Wheelers.

I feel like I should mention that I'm not trying to make Nancy into an awful person, I just see her reacting something like this at this point. I hope at least someone else will think so too and she's not coming across as totally unsympathetic because that's the opposite of what I'm trying to do. And things will lighten up... soonish. :)

Thank you for reading! As always, I'd love to hear your opinions! :D